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4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND   20815   (301) 656-4068

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SUBJECT   Tom Peters/Listening to Customers

        DOUG RAMSEY: Our contributing editor Tom Peters, co-
author of the book In Search of Excellence, talks about the im-
portance of listening to customers.

        TOM PETERS: I taught a seminar awhile back four days in
duration. At the end of the third day, a small-company president
summed up the entire seminar to date. He said, "You know what
this stuff amounts to? It's a blinding flash of the obvious."
And I think he hit the nail right on the head.

        One of the pieces of the obvious that confuses me, we
talk about customers paying attention to customers. And the
heart of it, we believe, is garden-variety down-to-earth vis-
ceral, palpable listening to your customers. Not the 3750-page
computer printout, but just listening through the ears, you know?
And let me tell you what I mean, give you a few examples.

        The other day I gave a presentation, and at the end of
that presentation I had an interview with one of these new little
cable outfits that's popping all over the country. On my way
into the interview booth, the fellow who's the marketing director
for that group, who I'd never met before in my life, grabbed me
and he gave me this big bear hug, and he said, "Wow!" He said,
"I loved your book, especially that Chapter 7 which has to do
with close to the customers." He said, "I read it and I went out
and I called some of our customers and I actually asked them if
they liked our programming. And they told me."

        You know, I mean it's a marvelous story. But the ques-
tion to me is, why in the world wasn't that like falling off a
log? Shouldn't that be a natural thing to do? I mean that's

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what we mean.

At a seminar the other day I was talking with a fellow by the name of Joe Bouty (?). He runs a company in New Hampshire called Markham Corporation. They just had their annual four-day off-site meeting. They decided to focus on customers. So he came up with this great idea, about which everybody in the company, I might add, was totally skeptical. What he did was he had the group of senior officers take three kinds of customers, great customers, average customers, and crummy customers. Each one of the officers spent a full day with a customer.

Now, what they said to him on the front is, "The customers are going to be irritated. They don't want to waste their time with us."

To the contrary. He said, "Thirty years, and it's the best meeting we've ever had. First of all, the customers loved it. Secondly, we had real-live data about real customers."

Why don't we do that kind of stuff more frequently?

A training program I work on deals with getting close to the customer, and it asks some really embarrassing questions, like when's the last time you've seen a customer? One of my colleagues was running it with the eleven senior officers of Volkswagen in South Africa, and they were answering this question. These guys are sitting around asking this stuff, talking about their experiences. It turns out the most recently that any of those people had ever been on a dealer showroom floor selling cars was fully 15 years ago. So they made a commitment to go out and peddle cars one Saturday a month for the next end of time, as the case may be.

Apple Computer, a variation on the theme. They've got all their senior officers listening in two or three hours a week on the 800 toll-free customer call-in line. The nice thing they do is after you've listened in, you get a plaque saying that you listened in. And the real beauty of it is they put a gold star on that plaque if you have the guts to actually answer a customer's question.

Now, what do these examples add up to? Boring. Just plain-vanilla simple ways of staying in touch, tangibly, palpably, viscerally, with the customer. Not through the printouts, but eyeball-to-eyeball, smellin' it, lookin' at it, fellin' it.

I don't know where we lost the ability to do that, but I think we really need to get it back.